DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 259 CS 509 842

AUTHOR	Woods, Marilyn J.
TITLE	Developing an Interpersonal Communication Training Course for Police Officers: Lessons Learned.
PUB DATE	1997-11-00
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (83rd, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Techniques; Course Content; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Police Community Relationship; *Police Education; *Professional Development; Sensitivity Training; Skill Development; *Training Methods; Training Objectives
IDENTIFIERS	Applied Communication; *Communication Strategies; Community Policing; *Strategy Training

ABSTRACT

This paper chronicles the preparation, describes the course content, and details the evaluation of a course designed to train police officers in interpersonal communication. Training was done in two-hour sessions for a police department that was implementing the philosophies and activities of community policing. The paper discusses the needs assessment, which also served to get trainees to begin thinking about the subject of the training. It categorizes the responses from the needs assessment in five areas: communication, attitude, emotion, beliefs, and situational. Teaching the course helped to clarify for the instructor what it means to participate in applied communication study in a "real" world setting and that each trainer would take different lessons from the experience. (Contains nine references.) (Author/CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 419 259

Developing an Interpersonal Communication Training Course for Police Officers: Lessons Learned

Marilyn J. Woods

The University of Texas at Arlington

Box 19107

Arlington, Texas 76019

MWOODS@UTA.EDU

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Woods

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS509842

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Communication training is appropriate for most businesses and industries. It is particularly appropriate for law enforcement officers who focus on skill retention and development throughout their careers. This paper chronicles the preparation, describes the course content, and details the evaluation of a course designed to train police officers in interpersonal communication. The training was done in two-hour sessions for a police department that was implementing the philosophies and activities of community policing.

Training Police Officers in Interpersonal Communication: Lessons Learned

When organizations make changes in philosophies and policies, employee training is an expected consequent. For police departments one of the most recent changes is to commit to community-oriented policing. According to Pate and Shtull (1994), "Community policing, a strategy calling for the police to have more frequent contacts with ordinary citizens to identify and help solve their problems, has been implemented in some form in police departments from Singapore to St. Petersburg" (p. 384). With an increased emphasis on interactions, police organizations will need to find ways to help officers communicate more effectively.

To what extent should one expect communication training to achieve the goal of "improvement"? A reasonable response would be based on the contingencies of the situation. For the situation discussed in this paper, the contingencies include a short period of time, organizational change, police officers, and some concerns about acceptance.

Communication training for police officers may

offer a special challenge or opportunity, particularly for civilian trainers. Ed Nowicki (1993), a police training specialist, writes, "A group of in-service police officers can be one of the most difficult groups to instruct, and they will take any unprepared or unknowledgeable instructor to task" (p. 88). For communication specialists or those who choose to act as consultants or trainers during periods of organizational changes, learning something from the experience is a bonus.

This paper gives a capsulized view of an interpersonal communication training experience that contains several provocative issues. From one perspective the training would appear to be easier because it is part of a regular requirement for employment. Yet, it is made more difficult because of the elusiveness of the overall changes that were taking place in the organization. The profession is highly enculturated (Van Maanen, 1972) and resistant to outside trainers (Nowicki, 1993). In the early 1990s a college-town police department decided that community policing was the appropriate change needed in the department.

Preparation

Needs Assessment

As in most prepared presentations, consulting requires getting to know the members of one's audience and their needs. Arnold and McClure (1989) suggest that communication consultants need to complete a needs assessment before offering communication training. The central purpose of the needs assessment for this training was to determine how officers viewed their need for communication skills in general and their conversational skills specifically in order to focus the course material. A second purpose for doing a needs assessment was to get the trainees to begin thinking about the subject of the training.

The needs assessment was completed with the assistance of the sergeant that was in charge of training and development. The developed questionnaire was based on the descriptions of police duties provided by interviewing the police sergeant and from Community Policing: How to Get Started, a book written by community policing experts Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux (1994).

The questionnaire and cover letter were given to

each officer through the internal mail system. The cover letter was provided by the sergeant to increase the response rate. The officers returned 65 questionnaires. The results of the first part of the needs assessment were as follows:

Communication Needs Assessment Data

Communication skills	Mean Ranking
Listening	1.9
Questioning	2.5
Informing	3.1
Observing Body Language	3.75
Describing	4.17

Conversational skills	**Mean Ranking**
Making myself clear	2.35
Keeping emotions under control	2.66
Understanding what someone else is saying	3.01
Winning an argument	4.7
Proving my point	4.9

(All rankings are based on 57 of 65 responses due to missing values for some questions)

From the perspective of communication competence, the ten skills are close to the gist of what is studied in the area of interpersonal communication competence.

> Communication competence is the ability to attain relevant interactive goals in specified social contexts using socially appropriate means and ways of speaking that result in positive outcomes with significant others. (Stohl, 1983, p. 688)

Even though the broad concept of communication competence was not the objective of a two-hour training session, it could have easily served as a long term goal for all concerned. According to Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux (1994), "In addition to the skills traditionally associated with police work, the job of community policing officers also requires enhanced interpersonal and communication skills, as well as problem-solving skills" (p. 17). Such skills are discussed throughout their book on implementing community policing.

The social contexts in which officers interact can range from friendly chatting to life threatening. Therefore, other questions on the needs assessment survey sought to gain knowledge about how officers

characterized communicative encounters. Open ended questions on the survey provided descriptions of what officers commonly found to be confrontational and positive encounters on the job. Those responses were categorized into the five areas: communication, attitude, emotion, beliefs, and situational.

Characterizations of Confrontational Encounters

(in descending order of frequency of occurrence)

1. Communication
    - not listening
    - refusal to hear another side of an issue
    - miscommunication
    - the way something is said, choice of words
    - argumentativeness
2. Attitude
    - presupposed rightness on the part of the citizen or officer
    - aggressive/condescending attitude
    - bad attitude
    - ego involvement
    - apathy
3. Emotion
    - out of control

losing one's temper

4. Beliefs/Prejudices

inflexibility in beliefs

close mindedness

strong differences in opinions/beliefs

stereotyping

5. Situational

nature of police work

arrest situations

lack of control over situation

level of personal crises when officer arrives

alcohol/drugs

citizen's interference

Characterizations of Positive Encounters

(in descending order of frequency of occurrence)

1. Communication

listening

willingness to hear/understand other side

sharing ideas and beliefs

adequately express ideas

2. Attitude/disposition

polite

professional

rational/reasonable

friendly

3. Emotion

under control

direct emotion toward situation not person

rational

4. Situational/action

provide solutions which are accepted by all parties

establish a rapport and convey a sense of genuine concern

ID yourself, conduct yourself professionally, listen to them, render suggestions and solutions

treat people with respect, whether they deserve it or not

The responses showed an understanding of relating to people in positive and negative ways in the line of duty. The confrontational and positive encounters served as guides for developing role playing situations for instructional purposes. As a preparatory note it was accepted that officers who chose to return the questionnaire may have a greater concern for

communication or their jobs.

Course Design

After reviewing the survey results and talking with the training coordinator, the class was designed and a proposal was delivered to the sergeant. The proposal had to be approved by the Council on Law Enforcement Education and Training (CLEET) in order for the officers to receive annual training credit. The design of the proposal included establishing instructional objectives, activities, and success measurements. A written exam was required for each participant based on the request of the police department. The main points of the completed proposal included instruction, activities, and evaluation. Instruction included (a) lecture on functions of communication, (b) discussion on problematic communication and solutions, and (c) exam to assess command of lecture material. Activities included (a) role playing for conflict management, (b) the Personal Inventory of Communication Skills (Womack & Finley, 1986). Class evaluation included a response form (Arnold & McClure, 1989) and an explanation of the form.

Course Evaluation

The results of the course evaluations are provided for in two ways--course evaluations tabulations and interpretation of class discussions. Course evaluations will be presented in this section. The discussion and implication sections provide insight from class discussions.

The course was evaluated by each officer. The evaluation forms were collected by a police officer and turned over to the instructor. Copies were kept by the instructor and originals were kept by the police department.

Results of Class Evaluation

Usefulness of material (N=111)

Very useful	(n=55)
Somewhat useful	(n=54)
Not useful	(n=2)

Overall rating of the class (N=111)

Excellent	(n=40)
Good	(n=57)
Average	(n=13)
Fair	(n=1)
Poor	(n=0)

Overall rating of trainer (N=111)

Excellent	(n=69)
Good	(n=38)
Average	(n=13)
Fair	(n=1)
Poor	(n=0)

How to make the class more useful (Open-ended question, representative comments)

Need more time (most frequent response)

Need more detail

Need more role playing

Need less acting

Utilize a police officer for training

Would not change

The weakness of the evaluation instrument is that there is no way of knowing what the officers were comparing the class and the trainer to in their evaluations. The "need more time" comments show that officers are willing to learn how to communicate better on an interpersonal level.

Discussion

Lessons Learned

Training police officers to improve interpersonal

communication skills goes beyond knowledge to being able to accept challenges targeting one's ego. These challenges seem to come mostly as perspectival issues that exist between civilians and officers. The following summary statements represent the reflective view of the experience and the interpretation of the data that were presented in the needs assessment and the class evaluations.

1. Always be prepared for resistance to compliance and challenges from class members. There was less resistance than was expected. Each class had supervisors in attendance which probably helped.

2. Stick with your objectives. It is easy to let the class develop from real life situations, but there was not another day to make up for lost work.

3. Training works best when there is a bigger picture such as getting continuing education credit or making it part of a full day's training.

4. It is possible to be respected based on one's competence. The officers sought assistance with individual communication problems during the breaks. This was taken to mean that perceived competence as an instructor was present.

5. Know how you view your audience.

To broaden my perceptions of police work beyond that provided by past experience and snippets of news or televised dramas, other information was sought. Articles from law enforcement journals such as The Police Chief and FBI were used as to gain a perspective of the conceptualizations that police leaders put forth about themselves. In retrospect, those journals provided a respect for what goes into managing police department and examples for use during class discussions.

The most exciting lesson learned is that officers were willing to discuss their real concerns during the class. The following table provides a view of the issues with which officers wanted further assistance and some points on what the underlying concerns could be.

Communication Areas Officers Want to Improve

Following the personal assessment of communication skills each class participated in open discussion about communication situations in which they would like to improve because they are problematic. The following are situations that were consistently

addressed or led to intense discussion. Intense in this case would be a variety of opinions or examples brought up by the officers. The areas are taken from the Personal Inventory of Communication Skills developed by Womack and Finley (1986).

Talking with	Insights into Problem
members of minority groups	Different from most officers
young people	Uncertainty in reception
	Stereotyping
	provides most of the views of the other
Dealing with	
supervisors	Lack of control
members of service agencies	Jeopardy of job position
Courtroom testimony	Often adversarial controlled communication
Public speaking	Fear of audience rejection

Interviewing

Significance of information gained

Lack of experience

Teaching this course helped to clarify what it means to participate in applied communication study in a "real" world setting. Each trainer would take different lessons from the experience.

Implications

As police organizations go through philosophical changes the need for training from communication specialists is apparent. The expressed concern for dealing with victims and law abiding citizens in relationship building ways means rethinking the way that one approaches one's job as police officer. This line of research and training fit with one perspective of the agenda of applied communication research and consulting (see Plax, 1991).

The social aspects of police work grow with the implementation of community policing policies and programs. More attention should be given to the communicative competence of officers as new measurements of success are brought forth. The neighborhood will be more conducive to law enforcement

when a sense of trust has been established with the citizens that they serve.

References

Arnold, W. E., & McClure, L. (1989). Communication training and development. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

Cheatham, T. R., & Erickson, K. V. (1984). The police officer's guide to better communication. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.

Nowicki, E. (1993 January). Training the trainer. Police, 38-41, 87-88.

Pate, A. M., & Shtull, P. (1994). Community policing grows in Brooklyn: An inside view of the New York City Police Department's model precinct. Crime and Delinquency, 40, 384-410.

Plax, T. G. (1991). Understanding Applied communication inquiry: Researcher as organizational consultant. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 19 (1-2), 55-70.

Stohl, C. (1983). Developing a communication competence scale. In R. N. Bostrom (Ed.), Communication yearbook 7 (pp. 685-716). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Trojanowicz, R. & Bucqueroux, B. (1994). Community policing: How to get started. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing.

Van Maanen, J. (1972). Observations on the making of policemen. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Womack, M. M., & Finley, H. H. (1986). Communication: A unique significance for law enforcement. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.